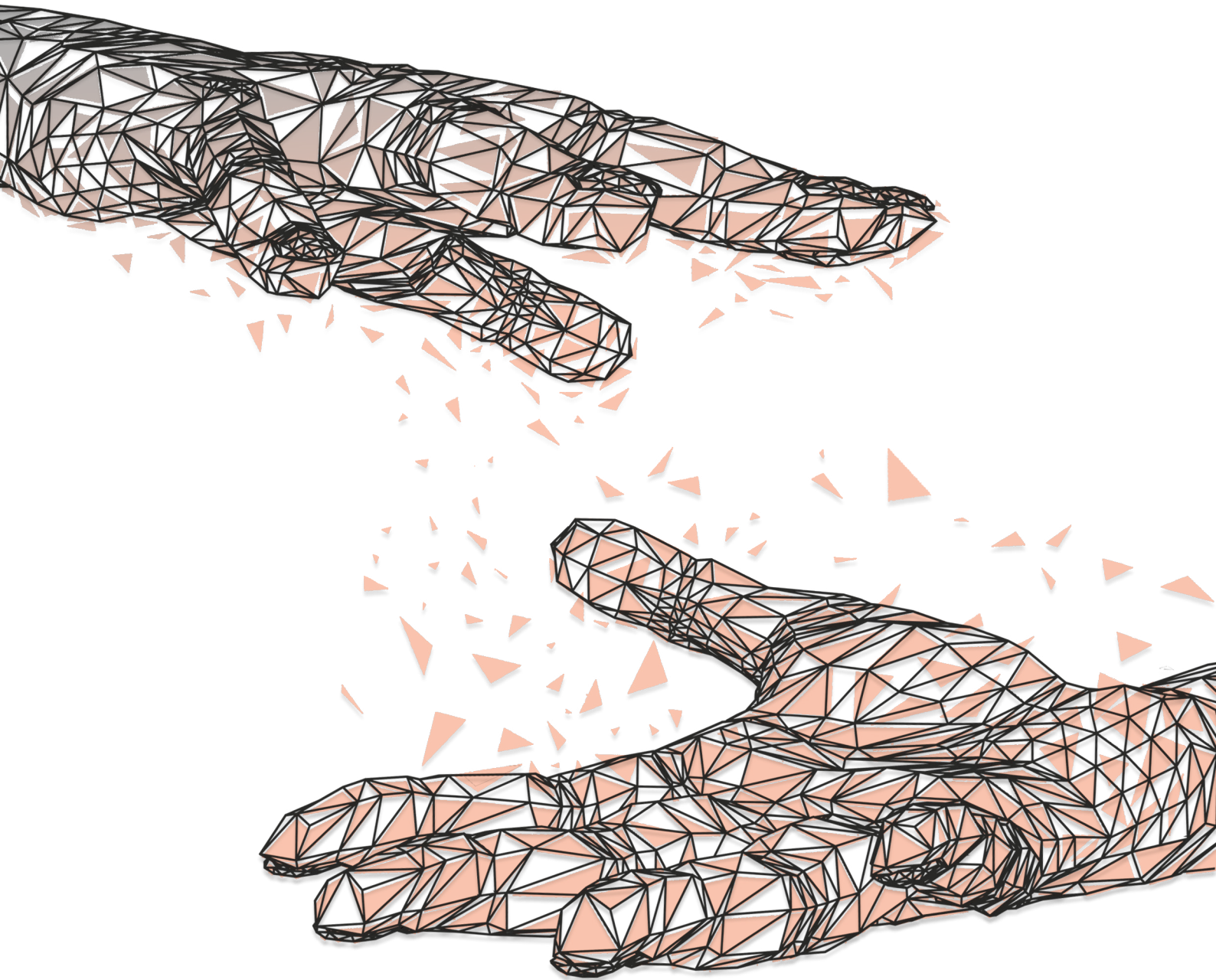


**COUNSELLING PRACTITIONER
BEGINNER TO ADVANCED**



**DEPENDENCY AND
CO-DEPENDENCY**

DEPENDENCY AND CO-DEPENDENCY

In order to paint a picture of the evolution of codependency, here is a true story of one fairly extreme example:

A man came to me a little while back, he was married with two children. He was utterly devoted to his kids and coming from a broken home himself had dreamt of building a warm and stable home to bring up his children in. His wife had pursued him initially and even moved herself into his house, he was flattered at her determination to be with him.

Time went by, and they got married, and a year later their first child was born. The first year was pretty magical, they moved out of the big city and spent a year in the countryside in his folks country house - his folks spent most of their time in the city. Then his wife was starting to get itchy feet, wanting to return to her home country of Scotland. Well this man was adventurous, and he was happy to try out a new place, so they packed their things and set off for Scotland.

*However he left behind his family, and he left behind his friends. He suddenly found himself in a city with no friends and family with a small child to look after. His wife back on her home turf quickly found work, but not only that, she discovered her ambition. Soon, she scarcely saw her family, and she left childcare to her husband. **At this stage, a dependency was inevitable for him, as he depended on his wife as he cared for their child, yet also the predisposed mental conditions were already in place for this couple to play out a codependent scenario.***

*Not surprisingly the husband started to struggle with his mental health and depression began to set in. He couldn't get work that could allow him to look after his child, so he spent a lot of time at home, going to playgroups where mothers would eye him suspiciously. Meanwhile, his wife told him she thought it was amazing that he could look after the child and that they made a great team. **She was now developing a dependency on him to look after the family that she was not even really sure she wanted.***

Before they knew it, the second child was on the way. There was renewed excitement and a round of prenatal classes as they prepared for baby number two.

This man set about decorating and preparing the house for the new arrival, filled with renewed optimism, and having also found flexible work that gave him time to care for his son. He guided his wife through the pregnancy, and it was a very positive experience. His wife seemed so grateful for his attentiveness and help in the process. Their second son was born, and he held his newborn against his bare skin. He couldn't be happier. He headed home, it was Christmas, and he was finishing the baby's room. He went to clear out a cupboard to paint it and discovered a stack of papers there. Sipping his coffee in a break, he had a look through the papers.

The coffee fell to the floor, and the bottom fell out of his life. These papers were a stack of love letters and love poems between his wife and a television presenter with whom she had been working. He was about 20 years her senior with four children of his own, and he was having an affair with her. Suddenly not only was the dream of the happy home exploded but was his beautiful new baby boy actually his? It was a body blow like few others. Following a confrontation, a DNA test, difficult months passed. He couldn't walk out, because his first commitment was to his children, and a newborn needs their mother. His wife assured him it was foolishness and immaturity and that she was over it.

*Slowly they tried to rebuild the family dream. Soon his wife was back at work and spending as much time away from him and children as she could, not even letting the children know if she would be home for bedtimes. **This is a form of control often***



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seen in codependent relationships. And then the evidence started to stack up, and it was apparent she was back at her affair. **The issues had not been dealt with, so a return to this pattern was inevitable.** He faced a difficult choice, could he go? Would he even be able to take the kids? He was struggling to balance job and caring for the kids, how could he manage alone? **By this stage, my client was so far into his codependent relationship, that his sense of self, his ability to assert his needs had evaporated.**

At the time when this man came to me, he was at rock bottom. Depression had its grip on him, but he was defiant that it would not ruin his role as a father. We started to look at the dependencies that were hampering his life. As well as a wife that prized her career and affairs over her marriage and children, he had also got himself into a position of dependence with his family. His mother was dependent on his advice, his stepfather and brother were dependent on his work contributions to a family business. He, in turn, was still reliant on his wife, holding out hope that she would change her ways. **The foundations for codependency will usually be found in the parental relationship or 'model behaviour', in his case his mother's feelings were paramount in his growing up, and his own were usually the subject of accusations of 'selfishness'. Therefore the pattern of self-sacrifice was established.**

Finally, he reached a breakthrough moment, where he determined that no one else would be responsible for his happiness, only him. He stopped phoning his wife at work, stopped texting her, he gave up all expectation of her behaviour and worked on his own mental health. He started to move away from family dependencies, stopped answering every phone call. **Here the client starts to reestablish the boundaries he had formerly abandoned.** His fervent hope was that his new non-dependent self would prove more attractive to his wife than the old dependent one.

This is not how codependence works. His wife was also dependent on him. She was emotionally stuck in adolescence (as to an extent, had he been) and needed his constant cries for attention. Her ability to reject him was what she thrived on. She was dependent on this power of rejection. So what happened when the tap was turned off? She no longer had a weak man calling for her attention? The collapse of codependence can be extremely dramatic, and can involve what Freud called, 'ego death'.

The wife's answer was to find another prospect, having been denied the power of rejection. She struck up a relationship with a new television presenter with whom she was working. He was engaged to another woman, but had no family, and he was very wealthy. He was soon persuaded to part from his fiancée. **Most likely the wife had discovered another form of codependent relationship to pursue.**

She didn't tell her husband. Instead, she went house hunting with her new man. They planned their new life together and instructed lawyers as they determined to try and take the children. By the time she told her husband about her new relationship, the purchase of the new house was underway. **Still pursuing the previous pattern of control, the wife was now using her new position of power to exert further control over her husband.** In pursuing his path to maturity and responsibility, he also unwittingly set up one of the most painful episodes of his life.

The wife now turned to another form of control, by rewriting history and producing a set of accusations against my client that were completely fabricated. She also sought to persuade mutual friends to lie on her behalf, to which they did not agree. He was devastated once again. He now had to fight to keep his children in a courtroom battle, seek work to pay for bills for which he was now solely responsible, and keep his mental health on an even keel.



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By examining core values, we had established that honesty and fairness were significant values for him. His wife and former codependent knew him extremely well and knew his vulnerabilities. This is often the case with codependents.

The husband represented himself in the High Court, stood up in court against lawyers, whilst his wife remained at arm's length. The wife was still trying to exert control even though she had a new relationship and no doubt still felt the need for the level of power she had formerly enjoyed. It was the hardest period of his life, but also the making of it. He emerged from it, with his children 50% of the time, with his house and a judge who had dismissed the fabrications of his now ex-wife. It was truly the death of the old ego, out of which can emerge a much more authentic, stronger and wiser version of the self.

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There are many more painful details to this story, but suffice to say it is a prime example of codependency and a real illustration of the damage that it can cause. The emotional tendrils of codependency can reach deep into each partner, and if not dealt with early can result in hellish experiences of both the relationship and the ultimate break-up. However, it is also important to note that the outcome for the husband was ultimately a good one, a more authentic, mature and responsible life. It is also likely that until the wife can confront her issues of codependency, she will continue to experience a similar or alternative codependent pattern in her new relationship.

"Most codependents, then, learned as children that to be "good enough" to be accepted by their parents they had to deny or repress many of their thoughts, feelings, and impulses. In attempting to secure their tenuous (and so anxiety-laden) parental bond, they were required to forget about what they really liked, wanted, and needed—even who they were."
- Leon Selzer

Within codependent relationships individuals find themselves warping themselves into false personalities in order to service the toxic relationship. They can end up acting in such a way that contradicts their core values and makes them deeply unhappy. In the above example, my client was trying to accommodate someone who simply did not share his core values, and in so doing was warping his personality.

Not all codependent relationships are as dramatic as this one, (although some are even more so, ending in fatalities) although they are all unhealthy.

As counselling practitioners, we have to be particularly mindful of the relationships with clients, to ensure that we do not develop dependency or codependency with them. If we allow that to take root in the client/counsellor relationship, it will poison it.



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So how can we characterise codependent relationships?

- Low self-esteem. If we believe that we are not good enough, then we automatically place ourselves in a vulnerable position. People who have a low opinion of themselves are likely continually comparing themselves to others unfavourably. This is an awful and futile exercise, as it is never objective, never considers all the information and it is a train of thought that sets out to diminish the self and inevitably succeeds.
- In turn, this poor sense of self, makes the person vulnerable to requiring a partner to offer them validation. They need this partner to tell them how good they really are (although no lasting change will take place).
- Their ability to express their needs, and then to require them to be met in the relationship, are severely compromised.
- They will 'sacrifice' themselves for the other and/or the children.
- The codependent will struggle to say 'no' to anyone, for fear of displeasing them and being rejected.
- The codependent's boundaries will become weak and vague, allowing themselves to be continually compromised. This can be emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, physically or financially. However their codependent partner may exhibit very rigid boundaries, or they may swap between these positions.
- As a result of this compromised state, the codependent will feel responsible for the feelings of others, whilst incapable of taking responsibility for their own feelings. (This was why the critical turning point for my client, was his taking responsibility for his own feelings, a very powerful decision to make).
- The ability to function healthily in other relationships is also compromised as the boundaries have been eroded. This means the codependent can become very reactive, at times over-sympathising with another's emotional state to the point of adopting it, or else becoming highly defensive to an inappropriate degree.
- Driven by fear of rejection and abandonment, the codependent may become a 'caregiver'. They may devote themselves to looking after others, but not through a reasonable motive of service, but through fear that if they don't do that, then they will be left isolated and alone.
- Having a poor sense of self, they may well be unable to own their own feelings, and attribute them to others.
- Control - a codependent can find security in exerting some form of control. This can become highly pathological with regard to their partner, as the codependent couple begin a kind of emotional warfare, attempting to exert some form of control over the other, either through a 'victim' role or a 'tyrannical' one.
- As this disconnect with the self progresses, the codependent can start to lose contact with their sense of self, sacrificing their integrity to the point that they may end up wondering who on earth they actually are.
- To hide internal weakness, the codependent can become extremely adept at appearing very strong. This may be by serving others and becoming their 'rock'.
- They may expend a good deal of time investigating the internal state of others and giving them advice, out of a need for a sense of connection.
- They can make themselves the ultimate 'troubleshooter' and 'firefighter',



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donning the superhero cape in order to bolster a desperately poor sense of self-worth.

- Even whilst fulfilling this saviour role, it is also likely that they won't receive any recognition for the good work that they do carry out. This is because they have dissolved boundaries, and they have made people around them think that they are there precisely for that role, and therefore they are taken for granted. In turn this further diminishes self-esteem and encourages victimhood.
- They may also try and use sex as a surrogate for genuine connection. And by pursuing sex as intimacy they can create further confusion and depression as the apparent 'intimacy' is lacking any authentic foundation and so the results become the opposite of those desired. The opposite is also possible in that sexual intimacy becomes impossible, through sexual dysfunction.
- Some codependents may develop 'false' methods of connection, such as trying to accumulate vast numbers of social media 'friends', that will look good to others, but in truth it is a figleaf for a lack of real friendships.
- A codependent can become the 'enabler' for their partners negative tendencies, be it alcoholism, drug addiction, victimhood, underachievement, immaturity, poor mental or physical health. They spare the partner from the consequence of their poor behaviour or thinking and therefore they allow them to carry on in that state.
- Lastly the codependent is likely in denial about their state. They think that the problem lies with their partner and not with them. We know that the problem lies with both of them, but the individuals have to overcome their denial in order to start back on a path to health. Ideally both partners can do this, but sometimes only one can and it is likely the relationship is destined to fail.

If you apply these principles to your practitioner-client relationships, what things might you have to look out for?

- Professional Boundaries - these should be maintained at all times. If you allow a relationship to move outside the professional, you will almost certainly establish some form of codependency
- Be mindful of your own state of mind in response to client issues. If you find yourself wanting to be a 'saviour' it should be a warning
- Are you being totally honest and authentic with the client? If not you may be enabling negative behaviour or thoughts, or deceiving the client.
- Does a client attempt to make you their friend beyond the appropriate? Remember the codependent wants to service need in others and gain positive affirmation. This is not a reason be unfriendly, but to be sure of your boundaries. Beware of being drawn into talking too much about yourself, it is not your therapy!
- Be mindful of any controlling behaviour, if you have a sense of a 'power struggle' in the dialogue, it may be because either you or the client is trying to establish control.

Darlene Lancer argues that it is highly likely that many counsellors are in fact codependents[3], as they arrive at a helping profession needing to help others, which as we've observed is a trait of codependency. It is vitally important that we honestly examine ourselves as helping practitioners to ensure that we are not relying on our clients to make us feel significant.



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Lancer further argues that the abilities necessary to becoming a good helping practitioner, are those developed in difficult childhood circumstances, such as having a narcissistic parent. In such a situation the child can develop a good deal of empathy and emotional responsiveness.

Therapists are human, just like everyone else. However there is an imperative that we should strive to be as self-aware as possible. If we give therapy, we should also attend therapy, if we coach, we should also be coached. We can not afford to be complacent with our own self-actualisation.

Time to reflect:

Consider your own significant relationships. Can you detect in them any of the characteristics listed above?

If you have clients, take time to consider your relationships with them. If not think about the relationships of friends, family or colleagues, can you identify any traits that may signify codependency?

Take some notes on your examples (do this before moving on to the next workbook):

Observed behaviours or characteristics that might suggest codependency:

Relationship:

Behaviours/characteristics:

Relationship:

Behaviours/characteristics:



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Relationship:

Behaviours/characteristics:



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